

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 393

CE 072 878

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TITLE The Experiences of Student Board Members in an Adult Literacy Program.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 28p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Adult Students; Board of Education Role; *Boards of Education; *Community Programs; Developed Nations; Educational Research; Foreign Countries; Individual Development; *Literacy Education; Student Attitudes; *Student Participation

IDENTIFIERS *Canada

ABSTRACT

A study explored the experiences of four adult students who served on the board of The Learning Center, a community-based literacy program. The adult education literature touched on the challenges, benefits, and limitations of participatory practices, but the three were seldom juxtaposed, raising the question of whether the limitations equaled or outweighed the benefits. Interviews focused on experiences on the board. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Transcripts and field notes were read and a coding system was developed. Findings indicated that participants initially felt apprehensive about being involved in the governance of their literacy program. The process of observation and questioning served to dissipate these feelings. The participants often cited reciprocity as the reason for their decision to participate actively in the Learning Center. Their involvement eventually led to an increased sense of ownership in the program. They developed a sense of community toward other students in the program. Participants were in the process of sorting out their relationships, responsibilities, and roles with other board members. They perceived themselves as supervisors, educators, or liaisons. The participants cited dedication and commitment as the characteristics of a good board member. They stated the program offered a supportive environment that, in turn, empowered students. Personal development emerged as a key benefit of their involvement. (Contains 18 references.) (YLB)

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The Experiences of Student Board Members in an Adult Literacy Program

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Pat Campbell
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Introduction

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This paper explores the experiences of four adult students who have served on the board of a community-based literacy program. In Canada, the concept of student involvement is a relatively unexplored area within the field of adult basic education. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to document the experiences of students who are involved in the management and governance of their literacy program in order to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. Jurmo (1989) states that the issue of student involvement needs to be understood so "that the practice will be strengthened [and] the participatory approach will [become] a significant force in the literacy field" (p. 82).

This paper will unfold with background information on student involvement, followed by a synopsis of the research methodology. Next, this paper will provide an overview of the community-based program where this study was conducted. Then, the findings section will discuss the following major themes that emerged from this study: (1) student involvement; (2) the board; (3) board members; (4) supportive environment and empowerment; and (5) personal development. The paper will conclude with a summary and implications for further research.

Background

I entered into this study informed by my own experiences as a literacy worker and by the adult education literature on student involvement. In the literature, student involvement is sometimes referred to as participatory literacy practices. Jurmo (1987) defined

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participatory practices as those which intentionally encourage students "to take greater control and responsibility in the running of literacy programs" (p. vii). In other words, students are actively engaged in the management and governance of literacy programs, as opposed to being passive recipients of a service.

During 1989-91, I served on an advisory committee for English Express, a monthly newspaper written in clear language for literacy students in Alberta. In 1990, the chair of this committee asked me to recruit a student representative to serve on the committee. I approached Julia, a confident and vocal student whose literacy abilities were quite well-developed. Julia agreed to serve on the committee and after one year, she resigned. During this year, Julia regularly attended meetings but she was quiet and withdrawn, only voicing her opinion(s) after directly being asked a question. Julia and I never discussed her silence on this committee and as a result, I was left with many unanswered questions, the central one being, "What were Julia's thoughts and feelings about her experience as a student on the committee?".

I also began to ask myself questions such as "Is this new movement simply a trend?". What is the *real* purpose for student involvement and whose needs are being served? Will student involvement produce changes in programs or will it simply reproduce existing structures and maintain the status quo? The above-mentioned incident piqued my curiosity about student involvement and prompted me to engage in this study.

A survey of adult basic education publications revealed a paucity of literature on participatory literacy practices within the North American context. Fingeret (1990) reported that "the research on the process of developing participatory programs is scanty, and their strengths and limits are not well documented" (p. 39). The existing literature was descriptive and anecdotal, with the exception of one piece of research by Jurmo (1987).

This review will focus on the challenges, benefits and limitations of participatory literacy practices, based on the current literature.

In Canada, Quebec's francophone literacy community has emerged as a strong force in the promotion of participatory literacy practices. The Coalition of Quebec Community Literacy Groups¹ stated that the student must "be fully involved as a decision-maker in the organization of his or her learning experience" (Miller, 1988, p. 17). Their rationale for this belief was that literacy can only be achieved in a collective effort in which the individual students play an active role.

The anglophone literacy community, particularly community-based programs based in western and central Canada, is only beginning to adopt a participatory model. The literature has clearly indicated that one of the biggest challenges will be whether literacy workers will be willing to share power and control with literacy students (Norton, 1991; Fingeret, 1990; Jurmo, 1989; Jurmo, 1987). Jurmo (1989) warned that "high-level decision makers who control adult education and other institutions may view a shift in control as a threat to the vested interests and current power structure" (p.84). I concurred with the provocative statement made by Brian Orvis, a literacy worker employed by Journeys Adult Education Association in Winnipeg:

Authority and power are curious things. Power is terribly sweet, and very often people who get power don't want to give up one iota of it - certainly not to someone who is uneducated (Norton, 1991, p. 215).

However, it will be probably safe to assume that the questions of ownership, control and power have a higher probability of being placed on the agenda of community-based literacy programs, than on the agenda of traditional hierarchical literacy programs such as those

¹The French translation is Le Regroupement des groupes populaires en alphabétisation du Québec.

found in prisons and school boards since the internal structures of the former are more flexible and open to change.

The literature outlined the benefits of participatory literacy practices. The student's personal development was heralded as a major benefit by several educators and researchers (Gaber-Katz & Watson, 1991; Norton, 1991; Fingeret, 1990; Jurmo, 1987; Balmuth, 1987). According to Fingeret (1990), participatory practices "appear to provide opportunities for personal development as students move into new roles, experience their own authority, and develop critical thinking and leadership skills" (p. 40). In addition, students may cultivate managerial skills through their involvement in hiring procedures and organizing events (Norton, 1991).

A secondary benefit was that greater student participation results in a more effective literacy program (Jurmo, 1987; Goldgrab, 1991; Mayer, 1984). Students "can make the programs more responsive to their own real needs and interests by serving on program boards of directors and advisory committees, in staff orientation and training, and in program evaluation and goal-setting" (Mayer, cited in Jurmo, 1989, p. 25). As students become more involved in decision-making, programs may re-direct their focus from an emphasis on the need to read to an emphasis on the needs of individuals who cannot read.

Finally, participatory practices have the potential for changing negative stereotypes of students among literacy workers and the general public (Goldgrab, 1991; Fingeret, 1990). As Anne Ramsay, a literacy worker at CORE Literacy in Kitchener stated: "We [literacy workers] see learners for what they have to give, their ideas as individuals, and for their life experience and common sense. It [participatory practices] breaks down stereotypes of what a learner is in your mind" (Goldgrab, 1991, p. 223). As students begin to expand their

roles and become involved in responding to public policies and making presentations at conferences, the public may also begin to alter their perceptions of students.

The literature revealed that literacy workers who were advocates of participatory literacy practices were also highly cognizant of its limitations. The inter-connected issues of time and funding circulated throughout the discussions about student involvement. It was mentioned that literacy workers needed to support the on-going activities of student involvement and naturally, this required additional time and funding (Gaber-Katz & Watson, 1991; Goldgrab, 1991; Jurmo, 1987). Goldgrab stated that "understaffing is viewed by the staff as an obstacle to full student participation" (p. 223). Likewise, Gaber-Katz and Watson argued that students found it difficult to commit the time to activities because of their multiple responsibilities such as work, school and family. Funding has become an issue for students since they need to be reimbursed for material costs such as baby-sitting and transportation to meetings.

Another limitation highlighted within the literature was that students may experience 'tokenism' or, in a worst case scenario, they may experience manipulation (Rodriguez, 1991; Jurmo, 1987). In his research on participatory practices, Jurmo discovered that some programs merely used students as window-dressing at public events and/or gave students a token role in boards of directors. Rodriguez interviewed students who had delivered presentations at a conference and his findings indicated that these students felt manipulated by literacy workers. Rather than allowing the students to express their concerns and issues at the conference, the literacy workers played a major role in shaping the content of the students' presentations.

The challenges, benefits and limitations of participatory literacy practices are seldom juxtaposed, raising the question, "Do the limitations equal and/or outweigh the benefits?".

As literacy workers, we need to keep this question foremost in our minds as we promote participatory literacy practices.

Research Methods and Sample

This study was based upon interviews with four adult literacy students who were present and past board members of an urban community-based literacy program. As well, one female staff member who worked at the literacy program was interviewed and one board meeting was observed. The name of the literacy program, The Learning Centre, and the names of the participants were changed to protect their identities.

The sample for this study was provided by Janice, the staff member. Initially, I had wanted to interview participants who were currently active on the board, but Janice thought the study would be more interesting if a past board member was included in my sample. At the time of this study, the four participants were receiving literacy instruction at the Learning Centre. Of the three active board members, Dan and Leonard were English-speaking males who were born in the Caribbean. Ziva, the third active board member was an English-speaking female who was born in Guyana. Ziva and Dan had served on the board for two years, and Leonard had served a six-month term. Max, the past board member, was a white English-speaking male who was born in Canada; he had completed a one-year term on the board.

The interviews were conducted in the privacy of a small room at The Learning Centre. The male participants were interviewed for approximately one hour and the female participant was interviewed for 30 minutes. After chatting with each participant about how he/she became involved at The Learning Centre and/or on the board, the following request was posed to each participant: "Tell me about your experiences on the board." The content

of the interviews was shaped by the male participants, resulting in an interview which was longer than the female participant's interview. For instance, the three males made interesting detours which touched upon the topic of illiteracy and how it affected their lives. Consequently, some general questions about their experience(s) on the board needed to be asked so that the interview would meet my needs, as well as theirs. Janice was interviewed to learn about the history and management of The Learning Centre.

Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed. After transcribing the first interview, emergent themes were identified which served to guide my questioning during subsequent interviews. For instance, a significant relationship between the participant and The Learning Centre was noted. Therefore, the question, "What does The Learning Centre mean to you?" was posed in the remaining interviews. After completing the first round of interviews, member checking was employed with the two male participants who spoke a Caribbean dialect (Lincoln & Guba: 1985). Member checking provided an opportunity to check my interpretations of some of their forms of speech as well as to pursue some of their responses in greater depth.

During the first phase of the data analysis, the transcripts and field notes were read and a coding system with approximately 90 codes was developed (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 176). A second reading enabled me to refine these codes. In the second phase of the analysis, the codes were clustered into 10 categories. Then, a color-coding system was used to highlight and match the 90 codes identified in the transcripts to their respective categories(s). In the final phase of the analysis, matrices were developed for each of the 10 categories. The matrices enabled me to identify patterns; this resulted in the establishment of five major themes that pertained to this study. As well, the matrices assisted me to combine some of the codes, resulting in a total of 40 codes.

In terms of methodology, two major limitations were identified. Firstly, the observation of the board meeting should have preceded the student interviews, rather than vice versa. This would have enabled me to formulate interview questions that were grounded in a familiar context. For instance, questions such as "What were you thinking when so-and-so said such-and-such?" could have been asked. Secondly, verbal interviews were restrictive because they did not allow the participants to make use of visual and non-verbal modes of communication. For instance, the use of photographs depicting the interactions of board members may have been a useful tool for generating further discussion.

The Learning Centre

The following information was gained during an interview with Janice. In 1985, The Learning Centre was established as a community-based literacy program in a mixed residential and industrial community after the need for such a program was recognized by a coalition of groups and individuals concerned with adult literacy. Gaber-Katz and Watson (1991) stated that there are three fundamental elements which are significant to the development of community-based literacy programs: (1) learner-centredness; (2) literacy from a critical perspective; and (3) community-building. The Learning Centre incorporates these three elements, but according to Janice, learner-centredness is the cornerstone of the program and it strives to meet the students' individual and collective needs.

The program's mandate is to provide self-help opportunities to assist individuals disadvantaged by under-education. Accordingly, The Learning Centre provides small group literacy instruction to students and, as well, provides volunteer tutors to work with students on a one-to-one basis. On average, there are 60 tutor-students pairs working together. According to Janice, in comparison to the volunteer tutors, the students are the most "active, involved and committed volunteers" in the program. The students' volunteer

role is multi-faceted and ranges from serving on committees and boards to organizing social events to participating in advocacy work.

At the time of this research, an eight member board of directors provided direction for the program; six board members were students, but only three of the six students regularly attended board meetings.² The program's by-laws state that board members must be active members of The Learning Centre and must have a six month history with the organization. Consequently, only tutors, students and staff qualify to be board members.

Since the formation of The Learning Centre as a non-profit society in 1985, the board has undergone four major shifts in its composition. Initially, the board was comprised of church workers and then, according to Janice, the composition shifted when "do-gooders" from the community joined the board. Gradually, tutors and staff began to serve on the board. The staff adopted a stronger voice in formulating the role of the board and noticed a discrepancy between the tutors' and the students' vision of The Learning Centre. Consequently, in 1989, the staff recruited two students to serve on the board but since these students were in a minority position they tended not to speak at board meetings. This led to the staff's recent decision to increase the number of students on the board, enabling them to have a stronger voice.

At the time of this research, The Learning Centre employed four full-time and one part-time staff members who carried out the directives of the board. The staff operated as a cooperative, with each staff member having specific responsibilities. For instance, one of the staff members provided support to student board members by setting the agenda and chairing board meetings, orienting new board members and reading the minutes at

²For the purposes of this study, the three students who regularly attended board meetings were interviewed.

meetings. In the near future, the board is going to adopt a rotating chair. This initiative will alter the role of the support staff member and expand the roles of the board members by providing students with an opportunity to chair meetings.

Prior to having students serve as executive members of the board, The Learning Centre had established written terms of reference for the President and Vice-President. However, I was informed that these terms of reference were not applicable to the current President (Ziva) and Vice-President (Dan), both of whom are students, since the terms outlined responsibilities requiring a certain level of reading and writing skills. Consequently, aside from having signing authority and acting as representatives for The Learning Centre, the roles and responsibilities of the President and Vice-President are quite flexible.

Findings

Student Involvement

Becoming involved.

Ziva exhibited curiosity about the board to a staff member and was then asked if she would be interested in becoming a board member. The male students, on the other hand, were directly recruited to join the board by staff members. Two of the male students were hesitant and needed time to "think about it" before making a commitment to become a board member. Leonard wondered "what this mean when I go on the board, what I going to do?" Dan expressed uncertainty about "what [he] was going to face" and whom he was "going to meet there"; Dan was concerned about the "challenge" before him. When asked what kept him from sitting on a board in the past, Dan responded that "maybe I was too scared, you know...maybe I was shy, doubt." After asking a few questions and observing a board meeting, both students decided to serve on the board.

The findings suggest that the participants were entering an unfamiliar terrain and that the process of observation and questioning helped to ease their initial concerns and apprehensions about serving on the board. Fingeret and Jurmo (1989) argue that adults with low-literacy levels may be reluctant to become involved in their literacy programs because of their limited experience with the processes used to shape educational institutions. Jurmo makes the point that since the opportunity to become involved in program governance is seldom extended to students, it is little wonder that they have limited experience. Fingeret specifies that students' "class status may have made it difficult for them to develop a belief in their own ability to participate in governance of formalized instruction" (p. 13). The findings of this study support the arguments of these two researchers.

Sometimes, individuals with low-literacy skills decline invitations to serve on boards or committees or to become actively involved in their work-sites or communities because of their limited literacy abilities. This may be especially true for individuals who want to 'hide' their illiteracy. Max explained how he had wanted to serve on various committees throughout his life, but had resisted the temptation to offer his services "because I can't read and write. To serve them it would show up." Yet, Max was willing to serve on the board of the Learning Centre because the board members knew and accepted the fact that he had low-literacy skills. At times, literacy workers, particularly those who work in programs who rely on one-to-one tutorials, are hesitant to involve students because they feel the students want to remain anonymous. Perhaps this overemphasis on confidentiality needs to be re-examined, as it sends the message that students should be ashamed of their limited literacy skills (Jurmo, 1989). If these literacy workers could hear Max's story, perhaps they might be more willing to ask students to participate and to give these students the opportunity to accept or reject the invitation.

Max proclaimed that it was a "thrill" to serve on the board of The Learning Centre because he was finally able to enter a reciprocal relationship where "he could give back what they're giving you." The other three students also mentioned reciprocity as their reason for becoming more involved in The Learning Centre. They felt very positive about the services, support and education which they had received through the program. In return, they wanted to demonstrate their appreciation by becoming more actively involved and offering The Learning Centre their "time" and "service."

Being involved.

A dominant theme which emerged from the data was that the students appreciated the opportunity to be involved in the management of The Learning Centre. By being involved, they felt more like insiders, at the centre of the program and less like outsiders, occupying a marginal position at The Learning Centre. There was an increased sense of ownership in the program because through their involvement; they had "more share" and "more say" in The Learning Centre. These were some comments that captured the idea of what it meant to be involved:

[I am involved] more deeper. But, it's nice to mingle [and] to get involved in things like these, you now. It's nice....We understand things more better for the school. [Dan]

It is lots of fun to know about what's going on and..understand more what's happening in The Learning Centre. [Ziva]

You know...what's going on, inside of The Learning Centre more than somebody from off the street...You know everything. You know what's going on. [Leonard]

You felt good cause youse was involved...It's just nice to see how different things run, you know.[Max]

In their day-to-day lives, individuals with low-literacy skills are usually the recipients of an organization's services; they are denied the benefits of learning how an organization is managed and operated. Being board members enabled these participants not only to see how decisions are made, but to be the decision-makers. Their involvement created a sense of ownership and pride in The Learning Centre.

Sense of ownership.

As previously mentioned, the participants were very knowledgeable and involved with the management and operation of The Learning Centre and as such, felt a sense of ownership in the program. Taylor (1991) argues that "feelings of ownership are enhanced when participants are included in decisions that affect them, when a feeling of quality prevails, when people get what they need and when the purposes of the program or literacy activity are fulfilled" (p. 207). The findings from this study indicate the participants' feelings of ownership produced a strong commitment not only to the purposes of the program, but towards the ethos of the program. They wanted a program that was open and accessible to the student body, a place where students could voice their problems and concerns. Moreover, they wanted a program that respected individuals regardless of their race and/or gender. Dan spoke of sexual harassment and racism and clearly stated, "The Learning Centre is not for that." In order to address the issue of sexual harassment, the board has established a committee to develop a policy on this issue. The findings suggest that student involvement promotes feelings of ownership that benefits the program.

Sense of community.

Jurmo (1987) states that a common benefit for students "involved in participatory activities is that of an increase in 'community-mindedness' toward others both within and

outside the program" (p. 315). This study's findings also indicate that the participants are deeply aware of and concerned about the other students in The Learning Centre. The participants spoke of the high attrition rate within the program and expressed regret for the students who had to leave the program for personal reasons. They were also empathetic towards students who had difficulties in learning to read and write. Dan sometimes tried to offer encouragement to such students:

I'm on the board [and] I will talk [to] some students. I discuss with them and say, "Oh, come on, I know you feel down and those things." I say, "Someday, I used to feel like I'm not learning nothing here." You understand, well you learn something. It's up and down, but you learn.

Rather than having an individualistic attitude and competitive relationship towards other students, the participants were highly committed to the welfare of others.

The Board

Purpose.

The three participants currently serving on the board commented on the purpose of the board, whereas the past board member did not make any references pertaining to this topic. These three participants concurred that the board was responsible for establishing the future direction of The Learning Centre. According to Leonard, the board "negotiate(s) what we going to do for the next coming month, or next coming year." The three participants also stressed that the board developed and implemented plans for future activities.

The two executive officers, Ziva and Dan, viewed the board as a governing body that made decisions concerning the management of The Learning Centre. However, these two officers offered contrasting opinions regarding the role of the staff and the board in decision-making. One officer stated that "everything **they** [the staff] want to do, **we** have

to agree." The other officer stated that "**We** have to make decision. **We** can't just agree with what the staff member tell us." Likewise, Ziva and Leonard had mixed views about the staff and board's role in the formulation of rules. Ziva stated that one of the purposes of the board was to "make the rules" whereas Leonard stated that board members were to follow the rules made by the staff. The findings suggest that the student board members and the staff are in the process of sorting out their responsibilities and relationships. Norton (1991) states that this 'sorting-out' process is ongoing, "particularly as [student] board members gain experience in their roles" (p. 210).

Relationships.

The participants described the egalitarian relationship which existed between the board members. They spoke of everybody being "equal" and "being one" on the board. Yet, an analysis of the transcripts revealed a fascinating interplay between the use of the words **they** and **we** with respect to the members of the board. The following statements illustrate the usage of these two pronouns:

Sometimes, **they** say, ok board meeting time. **We** stop and listen...**We** need some more people on the board. **They** suggest on the board the other day. [Dan]

You have to agree if **they** want to do something...
Cause when **we** have any problem **they** tell us bring it up to the meeting. [Ziva]

We discuss the problem and **they** arrive of a solution for it.
[Leonard]

Generally, the participants used the pronoun **we** when discussing the purpose, function and processes of the board. Yet, the pronoun **they** was used often enough to raise the question, whether indeed "everyone are one, [with] no difference." Judging from the context of these pronouns throughout the transcripts, 'they' refers to the staff and possibly

includes the tutors. Another limitation of this study is that I did not pursue this line of inquiry about the usage of the terms 'we' and 'they' with the participants. Perhaps the dialects of the participants was a contributing factor in the usage of these pronouns.

A democratic board.

The findings indicated that the act of discussion and consensus were important factors that contributed to the process of democracy. In fact, one participant made 13 references pertaining to the importance of discussion. The word 'discussion' was used far more frequently than terms such as planning, organizing, decision-making and so forth. Although the act of discussion was not a purpose of the board, it certainly played a significant role in the eyes of the participants. Kindervatter (1979) surveyed efforts that promoted the socio-political empowerment of historically powerless groups and identified democratic decision-making (i.e. discussion and consensus) as a key feature of the empowering process. The findings of this study also suggest a linkage between empowerment and the democratic process.

The participants described how consensus was reached through discussion. They explained how they discussed a specific topic or problem in order "to analyze it", "resolve it" or "negotiate it." After a thorough discussion, the board members would arrive at a solution and "pass it." Interestingly, only one participant remarked upon voting; this made me speculate about the frequency of this action. When I observed a board meeting, I only witnessed one occurrence of a formal motion and vote. This suggests that the board tends to rely on an informal model of democracy as opposed to a formal model. In other words, decisions are generally reached through discussion and consensus rather than a heavy reliance on Robert's Rules of Order.

Board Members

Roles and responsibilities.

The literature on participatory literacy practices states that student involvement has the potential to create new roles for students (Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989). Aside from mentioning that these roles include planning, evaluation and implementing a wide range of activities, there is no real definition of the shape or scope of these roles. The findings of this study sheds some light on the students' perception of their roles. The participants differed in terms of how they viewed their roles. The findings indicate that the President and Vice-President functioned as liaisons, educators and supervisors whereas the board members who were not executive officers did not adopt these roles to the same degree.

Ziva and Dan, the President and Vice-President respectively, made a conscientious effort to educate the students in The Learning Centre about current developments in the program. Dan and Ziva realized that they held privileged positions as board members and that the other students did not have access to the same information as they did. Since board members knew what was "happening in the Learning Centre," they were responsible for sharing this information with the other students. Dan described his role as educator when the students who were attending small group classes would complain that The Learning Centre was not meeting all of their needs:

We're educating them from the board... Sometimes the guys say, "Oh well, The Learning Centre don't do this, the Learning Centre don't do that." People suggest this and that. I will be there. It's good, like I'm on the board, so it's good. I will say to them, "Oh, it's nice idea, but we don't have the funds."

Since Dan was privy to behind-the-scenes information, he was able to respond to the students' concerns and act as a mediator by offering an explanation for the program's existing services.

Rather than viewing himself as being responsible for educating the students, Leonard perceived himself as a public educator. He often represented The Learning Centre at public functions. In these situations, Leonard would "talk about the school." I was intrigued with Leonard in that his perception of a board member's role(s) always differed from that of the other three board members. When I queried him about these discrepancies during our second interview, he offered a succinct explanation that satisfied my curiosity. He gently chided me by saying, "People see it in different ways. That's life."

Ziva, Dan and Max regarded themselves as supervisors because, as board members, they were responsible for "running" The Learning Centre. Reflecting back on his experience as a board member, Max stated that "you felt more like the employer than the employee cause.. you felt more that you was giving the orders than taking them." Ziva and Dan stressed the aspect of "responsibility." On one hand, they were more responsible for the operation and management of The Learning Centre. On the other hand, as supervisors, they needed to be responsible about how they conducted themselves in front of other students. For instance, Dan stated that "he had to set [an] example" for the other students and Ziva was careful about following the rules. Ziva explained how it would be "terrible" if we broke the rules since "we [the board members] make the rules." Both Dan and Ziva were concerned about being good role models for the other students.

At times, the students' comments were contradictory and illustrated a certain confusion about their roles. This confusion surfaced as the students, particularly the President and Vice-President, talked about their role as liaison. Dan recounted how he consistently

brought the students' suggestions to the board for discussion. According to Dan, that was his *raison d'être* for being on the board. When I asked Ziva if she played a similar role, she expressed uncertainty and wondered if she was "allowed" to perform that function. Ziva waffled, "I don't have any idea. I don't think we're allowed to do that." She concluded by stating that the students were supposed to voice their complaints to the teacher, rather than to the student board members.

Characteristics.

The findings indicated that the four students unanimously agreed upon the characteristics of a "good board member." The students named "dedication" and "commitment" as the primary traits of exemplary board members. The students specified that committed and dedicated board members were responsible individuals who attended meetings on a regular basis and were actively involved in the program. Simply attending meetings was not sufficient to be a **good** board member; one also had to be active in organizing and planning special events and in being an advocate for the program.

The students also mentioned how they conducted themselves during board meetings. I have labelled these actions and behaviours as secondary traits of good board members. All of the students whom I interviewed stressed the importance of listening and paying attention to other board member's ideas and suggestions. Ziva remarked that "you learn [by] listen[ing] to other people's ideas." Max was the only student who attached importance to being "a good speaker." All of the students, with the exception of Max, mentioned that in addition to listening, they were responsible for presenting their ideas and suggestions to the board. Leonard strongly believed that students should present their ideas because "that the reason why we on the board."

Supportive Environment and Empowerment

A recurring theme throughout the student interviews was that The Learning Centre provided a very supportive environment to the student body and board members. A corollary theme was that this supportive environment empowered the students in the program and on the board to have a voice or "a say" in the conduct of The Learning Centre.

Although the purpose of the interviews was to discuss the students' experiences as board members, it is noteworthy that they all spoke positively about their learning experiences at The Learning Centre. The participants discussed how they and the other students who attended the program felt "comfortable to be at The Learning Centre." Dan made the analogy that being at The Learning Centre was like being "in your home." The participants also spoke fondly of the staff's patience and understanding.

This supportive environment created an atmosphere whereby the student populace could speak without "fear" or "doubt." They felt safe to voice their ideas, concerns and frustrations. For instance, Leonard and Dan explained how the small group classes sometimes became a forum for students to voice their complaints and offer constructive suggestions about The Learning Centre. The four participants emphasized the notion that "everybody have a say" and a "free speech."

This theme of support was also interwoven throughout the participants' narration about their experiences as board members. The students generated two major reasons which contributed to supportive and comfortable board meetings. Firstly, there was a sense of team-building; board meetings were "serious" events, yet time was spent "joking" and/or discussing current events and topics of interest. This served to "loosen" up the students and make them feel relaxed. According to the participants, the board members relate to each

other as "friends" and "equals" and this comradery contributes to a feeling of well-being and safety. Leonard encapsulated the support he felt in the following statement:

I think if youse was in my shoes [a board member], you would feel good. Yeah, you would feel very good. There is nothing that's there to hide. You know, so you don't worry. You don't have to prove nothing to nobody. Just be yourself.

Secondly, the students described specific strategies that were implemented, creating an atmosphere of support. For instance, Max mentioned that every student had a partner who would "help you" to read documents, if necessary. Minutes were orally read by the entire board, rather than silently read. Ziva and Max recounted how everybody spoke clearly, rather than "talking over our heads." If the students had difficulty in understanding something, they felt free to ask for clarification. During the board meeting I observed, all of the students asked for clarification when necessary.

All of the students, with the exception of Max, continually declared that the students "have a say on the board." When Max was on the board, he was only one of two student representatives and according to Janice, these two students tended not to speak at board meetings because they were in a minority position. This strengthens the argument that the board is now a supportive environment in which students feel comfortable to voice their opinions about the Learning Centre and the future direction(s) it should be pursuing.

Personal Development

The findings indicated that the students experienced varying degrees of personal development as a result of serving on the board. Dan and Max spoke of an increase in self-confidence which in turn made them feel "better [and] safer." As their self-confidence gradually developed, they were able to take personal risks and they were able to take on

additional responsibilities related to program management. Dan and Max began to engage in activities which had previously been a source of frustration for them.

Max, a legionnaire, used to "marvel" at how some of his peers could "get up in front of a whole group of people and ramble on." Max remarked that if a person was a good public speaker, they could "go anywhere." Before joining the board, Max never engaged in public speaking. However, his involvement in The Learning Centre's committees and board provided him with the confidence to overcome his fear of public speaking. For instance, Max stated that as "you built your confidence up you could feel that you could speak in front of anybody." Dan described the pride he felt about his accomplishments over the past two years. Dan, who at one time was frustrated about banking, now has signing authority at The Learning Centre. "I sign that [bills, payments, staff pay] so, I feel proud I get to know lots of things. I proud of myself, honest to God, I feel proud of myself, that things what I couldn't do, I can do it now."

Dan and Ziva have noticed a dramatic change in their attitude towards themselves and others. Before Dan joined the board, he used to just "sit down and laugh when they [presenters] were talking" at workshops. Ziva was indifferent and "used to say who cares whatever goes on." However, Dan noted that he has become "serious" while Ziva stated that she has become more "responsible." As board members, they possess a heightened awareness about the literacy program and consequently, they feel more responsible about their actions. Ziva aptly summarized the change in herself when she said "you don't know what's happening so you say I couldn't be bothered whatever. Now I can't say that because I know what's happening, everything, so ...I'm responsible more." In this statement, Ziva addresses the contributing factor towards her indifference, and names it as being uninformed. If one is constantly on the receiving end of outside social forces which one has little control over, one tends to become indifferent, apathetic and even fatalistic.

However, if one is knowledgeable about these outside forces and realizes he/she has the potential to change them, one adopts a more positive attitude.

Interestingly, when Leonard was asked if he had noticed any changes in himself, he emphatically stated that "really and truly, there is no changes." Although Leonard did not mention an increase in self-confidence, he often referred to his newly learned managerial skills. According to Leonard, he had become more efficient at organizing meetings, planning and resolving problems if "things not going right." Clearly, the findings from this study support the literature that cites personal development as one of the key benefits of participatory practices (Gaber-Katz & Watson, 1991; Norton, 1991; Fingeret, 1990; Jurmo, 1987; Balmuth, 1987).

Summary

The purpose of this paper was to explore the experiences of four adult students who had served on the board of The Learning Centre, a community-based literacy program, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of student involvement.

The findings indicated that the participants initially felt apprehensive about being involved in the governance of their literacy program. The process of observation and questioning served to dissipate these feelings of apprehension. The participants often cited reciprocity as the *raison d'être* for their decision to actively participate in The Learning Centre. Their involvement eventually led to an increased sense of ownership in the program. As well, the participants developed a sense of community towards other students in the program.

The findings suggested that the participants were in the process of sorting out their relationships, responsibilities and roles with the other board members, students and staff.

With respect to their roles, the participants perceived themselves as either supervisors, educators and/or liaisons. The degree to which these roles were adopted was influenced by the participant's position on the board. The participants did agree upon the characteristics of a good board member, citing dedication and commitment as the principal characteristics.

The findings revealed an interesting relationship between support and empowerment. The participants continually stated that the Learning Centre and the board offered a supportive environment, creating feelings of comfort and safety. This, in turn, empowered the students to voice their opinions about the Learning Centre and the direction(s) it should be pursuing.

Finally, the findings showed that the participants experienced varying degrees of personal development, ranging from self-confidence to attitudinal changes, as a result of serving on the board. For the participants, personal development emerged as one of the key benefits of their involvement.

Implications for Further Research

This piece of research unleashed a myriad of questions that point to the need for further research. One question parallels or fits into the body of research on student participation and attrition rates. For instance, what are the precipitating factors leading to a student's decision to remain on or resign from a board? Another set of questions are bound to the notions of change and transferability. For instance, as students begin to change and learn new skills through their involvement, do they transfer and apply these skills in their community? Also, what changes do literacy programs experience as students become more involved?

The field of adult basic education would be enhanced through further research into the area of participatory literacy practices. In order to move beyond the pioneering stage of participatory literacy practices, additional research is needed. This study provided some insights into the experiences of students who were involved in program governance. However, longitudinal studies would serve to address additional questions that were not touched upon in this study.

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